

Corporate Peer Challenge **Forest of Dean District Council**

10th – 12th July 2018

Feedback Report

1. Executive Summary

Elected members and officers of The Forest of Dean District Council are very committed to the Forest and passionate about the people and communities they serve. They have shown resilience to change over a period of time and still express an appetite for things to be done differently in order for the council to be sustainable in delivering outcomes for the people of the Forest. This is evident in the steady progress made by the council in using and examining different methods of service delivery either through commissioning services, entering into partnerships or looking at being more commercially minded. The council has done well to ensure 'business as usual' through the many changes that this approach has brought, particularly over the past 18 months with the creation of its partnership service delivery company from November 2017, as well as a new administration from July 2017.

The performance of many core council services is good. Staff are committed and loyal despite the workforce experiencing many changes over a period of years. Senior management capacity is lean and there is a need to ensure sufficient capacity to deliver future change, particularly when managing partnership contracts, engagement with strategic partners and achievement of Corporate Plan priorities.

A refreshed, ambitious and realistic Corporate Plan is needed to signal the goals and targets of the council and help to maintain a focus on the short and medium priorities that reflect the current challenges - as well as taking into account future social, economic and political changes. It would also need to set a clear direction for the council and the Forest and enable key priorities to be identified within realistic timescales so that resources and capacity are focused in the best way, whilst enabling the setting of objectives that individual officers and teams need to be working towards.

In looking at priorities the council needs also to look at key challenges within the Forest that might not be its specific responsibility but need a collective and collaborative approach beyond contractual type partnerships, for example, educational attainment is below the national average and many local young people suffer from relatively low aspirations. The determinants of education, housing, environment and transport are critical components to having healthy and economically active communities. These challenges need be brought to the fore in the refreshed Corporate Plan and the council will have to consider how it can use its limited capacity to work on solutions with Gloucestershire County Council and other strategic partners to tackle these issues over the longer term.

The greater emphasis the new administration is placing on local economic growth and housing is gaining traction amongst partners and is important in raising the profile of the Forest. There is a clear appetite to explore opportunities for commercial investment and making good use of the council's capital assets. Refreshing its Corporate Plan to clearly state its goals and aspirations for the council and the Forest will help to bring partners and the public along a shared endeavour and to attract inward investment. Devising and securing financial resilience to ensure continued service delivery via effective contract management should be an integral part of setting out how corporate goals will be achieved, along with the development of an Asset Management Plan.

The council has been bold in building on the success of a partnership for shared services to establish a Joint Venture Teckal company limited by guarantee, Publica Group Ltd, with three other local authorities (Cheltenham Borough Council, Cotswold District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council) as its partnership service delivery company. Since November 2017 there have been consequential changes to the senior management structure of the council and the vast majority of staff TUPE transferred into Publica. At the time of the peer challenge it is still early days for the effects of these significant changes to be fully understood and in recognising this the peer team have ensured an overarching theme of this report is about how the council steers successfully through current and future changes, and ensures the capacity and capability amongst elected members and staff is in place to do.

There is a strong sense of the opportunities the Publica partnership will provide in order to operate in a more commercial and creative way by sharing resources in a context of current and future financial pressures. It is important during the next stages of the transformation process to ensure the opportunities and savings can be realised so the council is in a strong position to meet the significant challenges of enabling service delivery in the Forest.

As the council continues to determine its own policies, priorities and performance standards through its retained democratic sovereignty it needs to ensure the Publica partnership is delivering what it is meant to. However, this should not be only in relation to Publica, as the council needs to ensure it has a robust approach to strategic oversight and risk management - including how risks are elevated from all individual projects and partnership contracts. A formal project management approach, such as PRINCE2, or another type of risk management framework, may be helpful to consider.

The next phases of the Publica transformation are crucial and the peer team sensed a desire and need for this to be done at pace, particularly amongst staff. For this to be achieved successfully there is need to ensure an ongoing, comprehensive and inclusive approach to communicating what changes and opportunities lie ahead, the implications of those changes and clear timescales for implementation. Whilst there have been some engagement sessions these were not specific about structures, timing, roles and responsibilities and what the operating model would mean for staff. A consistent message from staff we met was they wanted to be informed and know what was going to happen when.

Engage positively and play a full part in the LEP, with the county council, Member of Parliament (MP) and other strategic partners and demonstrate that you're a credible partner. The recent creation of the Forest Economic Partnership by the council demonstrates how it wants to work to maximise the willingness of partners in promoting the visibility of the Forest and play to the Forest's strengths and unique assets. Partners are keen for the council to maintain and strengthen its leadership role in the Forest and this was a refrain heard from business, from other public services, the voluntary sector, and parish and town councils.

Elected members need to conduct important council business in a way that makes best use of time and capacity whilst demonstrating the kinds of behaviours and values that

continue to secure opportunities and to bring partners and the community together to achieve a set of goals for the whole of the Forest.

2. Key recommendations

There are a range of suggestions and observations within the main section of the report that will inform some 'quick wins' and practical actions, in addition to the conversations onsite, many of which provided ideas and examples of practice from other organisations. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the Council:

- a) **Focus on priorities and put in adequate resources human and financial to support delivery.** A refresh of the Corporate Plan is required to articulate the council's aim to think big, be innovative and sustainable and above all, to give the Forest of Dean the voice, as well as the economic and social status, it deserves.
- b) **Review the capacity required to deliver opportunities within regeneration.** The long term nature of regeneration requires attention to be given to the capacity required to deliver challenging and complex plans. This includes considering the procurement of external professional support. It may be appropriate that the required specialist resources are obtained on an interim basis at different times for each programme or project.
- c) **Ensure a robust approach to strategic oversight and risk management including how risks are elevated from individual projects and partnership contracts.** Robust performance management processes and risk management systems are essential in ensuring that partnerships, contracts and complex and long-term regeneration plans are monitored and delivered. It is a key requisite that performance management systems and process are adopted that set out the key milestones in granular detail from conception to completion and identify the business benefits.
- d) **Develop the relationship with the Gloucestershire Local Enterprise Partnership (GFirst LEP), Gloucestershire County Council and other strategic partners.** Whilst the creation of the Forest Economic Partnership is a very positive move this should not be at the expense of the wider economic growth context if the ambitions for the Forest are to be achieved. The importance and value of engagement and investment with the LEP is vital if the Forest is to secure funds, have projects prioritised and maintain as high a profile as possible.
- e) **Ensure everything is being done to ensure the ongoing development of elected members and officers so they can all fulfil their roles and achieve the outcomes for the people of the Forest as described in the Corporate Plan.** Giving clear direction to officers and conducting council business within the governance framework of the council are key requisites for any council and to help with this it is important that elected members and officers attend training.
- f) **Communication and engagement methods with staff regarding the Publica transformation programme.** Initiate with some urgency the communication and

engagement workstream of the transformation programme that includes more specific information to alleviate concerns and uncertainty.

- g) **Celebrate success and shout out about the Forest's strengths and the opportunities.** Celebrate and shout out about the Forest's strengths, its unique assets and the opportunities the council has to maximise these assets. Develop a more robust and strategic approach to corporate communications aided by a more coherent narrative on council, commercial and other public service priorities, advice and achievements.

3. Summary of the Peer Challenge approach

The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected your requirements and the focus of the peer challenge. Peers were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise and were agreed with you. The peers who delivered the peer challenge at the Forest of Dean District Council were:

- Janet Waggott - Selby District Council Chief Executive and Assistant Chief Executive at North Yorkshire County Council
- Cllr Clarence Barrett – Group Leader, London Borough of Havering
- Cllr Chris Millar - Leader at Daventry District Council
- Donna Nolan - Deputy Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer at Mendip District Council
- Jackie Smith - Corporate Director, South Staffordshire District Council
- Kay Burkett – Peer Challenge Manager, Local Government Association
- Kirsty Human - Advisor, Local Government Association

Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five questions which form the core components looked at by all Corporate Peer Challenges cover. These are the areas we believe are critical to councils' performance and improvement:

1. Understanding of the local place and priority setting: Does the council understand its local context and place and use that to inform a clear vision and set of priorities?
2. Leadership of Place: Does the council provide effective leadership of place through its elected members, officers and constructive relationships and partnerships with external stakeholders?
3. Organisational leadership and governance: Is there effective political and managerial leadership supported by good governance and decision-making arrangements that respond to key challenges and enable change and transformation to be implemented?

4. Financial planning and viability: Does the council have a financial plan in place to ensure long term viability and is there evidence that it is being implemented successfully?
5. Capacity to deliver: Is organisational capacity aligned with priorities and does the council influence, enable and leverage external capacity to focus on agreed outcomes?

In addition to these questions, you asked the peer team to consider/review/provide feedback on:

- Joint working and commercial ambitions. Are the council's current joint working arrangements effective? Is the council clear about its commercial potential and aspirations? Does the council use its own assets to best advantage?
- New leadership within the council. New Head of Paid Service and new Cabinet. How coherent as a Cabinet and are they giving clear direction?

The peer team have addressed the additional areas you asked us to look at within the main areas of feedback below and most importantly, in the recommendations as you requested. As a summary we have listed the key points under each of the additional areas in Appendix A.

The peer challenge process

It is important to stress that this was not an inspection. Peer challenges are improvement focussed and tailored to meet individual councils' needs. They are designed to complement and add value to a council's own performance and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared for the peer challenge by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent 3 days onsite at the Forest of Dean District Council, during which they:

- Spoke to more than 70 people including a range of council staff together with councillors and external partners and stakeholders.
- Gathered information and views from 52 meetings and additional research and reading.
- Collectively spent more than 220 hours to determine their findings – the equivalent of one person spending 6 weeks in the Forest.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit to Full Council on 12th July 2018. In presenting feedback to you, they have done so as fellow local

government officers and members, not professional consultants or inspectors. By its nature, the peer challenge is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback may be about things you are already addressing and progressing.

4. Feedback

4.1 Understanding of the local place and priority setting

There is tremendous passion for the area from elected members and staff in the council that takes its name from the Forest of Dean itself, an area of over 90 square kilometres that includes expanses of woodland along with extensive parts of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) that are within the district. There is a tangible pride about the uniqueness of the district and the peer team heard from many people in the council and from partners about the variety of the landscapes from the Severn Estuary and the Wye Valley to the rolling hills to the north and the opportunities these present.

Though it is early days The Forest Economic Partnership (FEP) created in January 2018 by the council has made a good start in bringing businesses, councils, the voluntary, community and education sectors and other partners together to give the Forest of Dean a voice in the Glos2050 big conversation in order to deliver a thriving and sustainable economy. An example of early progress is the focus on “getting the Forest working together”, participation in quarterly stakeholder meeting and the creation of four sub-groups to work to address key challenges and opportunities in the Forest of Dean.

There is particular recognition for the enthusiasm and focus the Chair of the FEP is bringing to this agenda and the leadership and promotional role of the Deputy Chair, the Cabinet Member for Development, Asset Management, Infrastructure and Housing, has enabled. It will be important for the success of the FEP that key officers with responsibility for regeneration and commercialism are a part of this strategic partnership in order to inform and advise about its agenda and actions.

The FEP is changing the perspective of businesses that the council is moving towards being less inward looking. Its terms of reference are showing the council’s understanding of the implications of the geographical location of the Forest of Dean District and the ways in which it is heavily influenced by wider Gloucestershire, Wales and the West Midlands.

There has been a recent growth in employment in tourism, which the council recognises as becoming increasingly significant. In response the council articulates a strong ambition to build on the opportunities tourism can provide whilst recognising that this should not be the only source of employment opportunities. There are several projects that the council wishes to progress including the marrying of existing popular tourist attractions to less well known cultural and historical assets, and to promote famous past inhabitants, such as the author Dennis Potter, in order to extend cultural experiences and boost tourism in the district.

The peer team are very encouraged by the potential that tourism can provide for the district and the ideas that the council and partners express to make the most of the natural environment and unique assets within the Forest and on its borders. There is a

good relationship with the Forest and Wye Valley Tourism Board but there may be other opportunities to work with a range of tourism operators to ensure the Forest as a destination of choice. A way to help maximise the economic benefits of the natural environment is through the production and implementation of a tourism plan and marketing strategy that can be used to promote all the wonderful aspects of the district.

There are plans that are in the early stages to build on the successes of relatively small specialist high tech businesses already located in the Forest to create employment opportunities. Global, national and regional trends in employment have resulted in a number of changes that have affected the Forest, this includes the general decline in manufacturing and enterprises moving abroad. The council with its regeneration and growth partners will need to devise solutions to the Forest's relatively outdated working environments in order to entice employers by the provision of quality and well connected accommodation.

Major effort has gone in to physical, social and economic regeneration and this is delivering tangible results. Recent Budget Working Group discussions have been around making use of the council's capital funds and better alignment of service level agreement funding next to community outcomes. Recent successes include the delivery of 100 new affordable homes spread throughout the district with a number of them in rural communities. In Churcham and St Briavels preference was given to people with a local connection in the allocation of properties to enable residents to remain in the village and to help those communities to flourish.

There is a strong civic pride and identity around individual towns and communities in the district that the Cabinet recognises as providing a significant opportunity to drive local regeneration activity. Recently Cabinet Members have been visiting towns to talk to local people and businesses to explore ways of bringing more vibrancy to the visiting and shopping experience of residents and tourists as a way of boosting employment and income for local people. The council has various partnership groups to help drive local regeneration activity including the Cinderford Regeneration Board, West Dean & Coleford Regeneration Board and the Lydney Coastal Community Team.

There is a recognition that the Corporate Plan is in need of a fuller refresh and that this needs to be formulated by drawing on the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), the district's needs assessment and other data sets such as statistics from the Office of National Statistics and the public health outcome framework results for the district. The peer team view this as a key development as currently the Corporate Plan is not tightly aligned to a long term evidence based needs assessment of the district. The Corporate Plan needs to be based strongly on all available and relevant information and data, including priorities stated through public engagement, to make sure that future boundary commission changes and elections do not derail projects and programmes that are in progress toward stated outcomes.

Looking ahead the council's existing financial capacity does not currently clearly match the scale of its ambition especially in areas such as the economy and regeneration. There is a clear need and opportunity to align the MTFS to the key themes and objectives of the new Corporate Plan. The peer team understands that economic growth and

regeneration will be a significant aspect of a refreshed Corporate Plan but have some concerns that unless all the council's outcomes and objectives are fully laid out and carefully prioritised there is the potential for the council to be taking on more than its capacity will allow. Without prioritisation and focus your ability as a council to achieve outcomes and make a difference will be affected. In addressing priorities it will be important to be clear what the council can affect even if it does not have direct responsibility e.g. education, quality of the road network and digital connectivity.

Not all partners think the needs of the Forest are fully understood and articulated consistently to influence and draw in resources to the district. Representation at key strategic partnerships vary between elected members as well as varying between officers. Whilst this is an understandable and pragmatic response to limited capacity and availability, it is at risk of creating a perception of inconsistency in contributions and missing opportunities to influence. This would be helped by being clear about how, and by whom, the Forest will be represented at key strategic partnerships and communicating this to partners so they understand the remit and authority of the Forest's representatives at important strategy discussions.

As part of the above the council needs to ensure it has a consistent and high level approach to influence the refresh of the Gloucestershire Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) to reflect the council's priorities. Going forward the council needs to continue to contribute to infrastructure investment projects, and other inter-related work, so its ambitious plans for economic growth offer potential to grow the tax base and address housing need and deprivation. Government money will be channelled through economic and industrial land plans and the council needs to be realistic about the capacity it has under the commercial/commissioning directorate within Publica to complete bids for these resources and support the economic, and commercial, ambitions.

4.2 Leadership of Place

The senior leadership have worked hard to position the Forest of Dean District within the Gloucestershire sub-region but accept that a lot of continued effort by senior politicians is still needed to enhance relationships with other councils and partners within the area. There is good engagement in partnership working within and beyond the district, both at the strategic and operational level. Through the Strategic Economic Plan for Gloucestershire the district was successful in bringing in funding for infrastructure across the County, including £3.8m support for the Cinderford Northern Quarter spine road and £1m for Lydney transport schemes. Doing more of this will be important to draw as much public sector investment as possible given the deterioration since 2010 in the ranking of the Forest of Dean in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2015 from 185 to 155.

The implications of the geography, ecology and history of the district are clearly understood by the council and form the basis of its recently refreshed priorities of economic growth and regeneration. Whilst the Forest as a place brings opportunities there are also challenges due to the dispersed nature of towns and communities within the district, some are very close to Gloucester, others look more to Bristol, Newport and Hereford. There are smaller towns outside the district but close to its boundaries which have an effect on the area, Ledbury, Ross on Wye, Monmouth and Chepstow. This

creates complexity in the growth agenda which the council has responded to positively, for example, by being represented at the Gloucestershire Economic Growth Joint Committee (GEGJC). The needs of each of the towns and communities within the district should be used to 'tell your story' through consistent narratives about what is bringing you to the table to talk to partners.

The Cabinet has huge ambition for the place and has articulated a refreshed set of priorities. A pragmatic approach was taken to build on the existing Corporate Outcomes and Objectives that were updated in early 2017 and informed by an inclusive process that enabled budget consultations with the community and input from scrutiny to take place. The new priorities reflect a stronger emphasis on economic growth and regeneration and have been helpful in articulating the commitment of the new administration for the council to be more outward looking.

Partners on the Prevention & Self-care Board and Enabling Active Communities Board are very positive about the council's contribution to the health and wellbeing agenda and cite the district as 'standing out' in its commitment to tackle health inequalities. The district has made good use of external funding through Gloucestershire County Council and Gloucestershire Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) to help increase the resilience of the community. Examples are the Social Prescribing/Community Wellbeing Service with funding of £128,000 over five years to provide community referrals enabling a wide range of clinical and community organisations to respond in an holistic way to people's needs.

There is a further opportunity to use the identity around individual towns and communities to apply the strengths based approach with communities as part of the council's input to healthier communities partnership work. The council would benefit from continuing to take an inclusive approach to place shaping, wellbeing and development by the stronger involvement of town and village parishes, who are keen to work with you. Enabling a 'big conversation' to determine the 2050 vision for the economic development of the district as part of the Forest Economic Partnership work will help to bring people with you.

The FEP has the potential to help the district reach its economic potential and push to play a proactive role in the strategic planning and policy making in Gloucestershire and beyond. Whilst still early days, the partnership is enabling new conversations including those with neighbouring authorities in Gloucestershire, Herefordshire and Monmouthshire. The FEP infrastructure and agenda focused on education and skills; transport and infrastructure; digital connectivity; and bridges and cross-border working enabled through its sub groups has the opportunity to drive these important conversations forward as long as it remains focused on action and outcomes. Crucial events are on the horizon that the council and the FEP need to influence, this includes participation in the Severn Summit led by the Welsh Secretary of State and the West of England Combined Authority. The Forest needs to ensure it is at the forefront of any opportunities for cross-border working in light of the Severn Bridge toll removal in December 2018.

The council is not maximising the opportunity to work in a true partnership of equals and is missing opportunities to engage positively and consistently with strategic

partners including the GFirst LEP, Gloucestershire County Council and the local MP. The council has seen itself as more of a junior partner and it is necessary to be more confident as a partner who has things to bring to the discussion and decision making table. This is being addressed as it is recognised that regular and consistent presence at the strategic partnerships is vital for the Forest to have its unique voice heard.

Continue to celebrate and shout out about the Forest's strengths, its unique assets and the opportunities the council has to maximise these assets. Consideration should be given to developing a more robust and strategic approach to corporate communications that includes social media and a resident's magazine. Reintroducing the Pride of the Forest awards, or a similar initiative, would provide a platform to promote the Forest as well as celebrating the successes of local people, services and businesses.

The council needs to state clearly how it will engage with the LEP and other strategic partners and be consistent in that engagement in order to build credibility and relationships - and to be part of important conversations. This will enable the council to be clear about the reality and possibility of infrastructure projects in support of growth in the Forest as well as being well placed to determine and present a number of areas or propositions to focus on that can offer the greatest return and prospect of delivery.

The change of leader has led to the formation of a 'rainbow' administration comprising members from four of the smaller political groups. A boundary review has just been completed by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England which will reduce the number of District Councillors to 38 from the next elections in May 2019. This new model will see a number of ward boundaries change and an increase in the number of multi-member wards. It is crucial that the council is realistic about the capacity and focus of elected members over the next 10 months and does everything it can to ensure these changes are mitigated so that the 'business as usual' service delivery ethos can prevail through the council's delivery, partnerships, contracts and projects.

As a new Cabinet/Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) working relationships need ongoing attention including clarity about respective roles. This will be important as the next phase of the Publica transformation programme is implemented to maintain a focus on priorities and deliverables and so everyone is clear about the part they play and their individual objectives. The new Head of Paid Service needs to be able to fulfil this important role with appropriate support and training without carrying responsibilities for his previous role otherwise key capacity in producing the refreshed Corporate Plan, advising Cabinet, maintaining oversight of the Publica arrangements and representing the council will be diluted.

The council does not currently have a concise narrative that defines its vision and communicates the way it will go about its business in achieving the Corporate Plan. Producing a more coherent narrative on the leadership role the council is committed to fulfilling to achieve economic and wellbeing outcomes in the Forest will help to draw in opportunities for more collaborative working. Include in your narrative the very specific stories about places where investment is needed, and why, and describe the opportunities within the district - use this to influence strategic planning and partners.

Keep the narrative concise and refreshed to promote the 'brand' that is the Forest of Dean District in order to excite partners, attract visitors and engage influencers.

4.3 Organisational leadership and governance

The council's leadership is outward-looking, with a focus on the interests of the Forest and its residents. It is very self-aware and passionate about the interests of the people who live, work, visit and invest in the area. The council is clearly aware of the nature and the scale of the challenges that the Forest faces going forward and it has faced pragmatically the challenges it had as an organisation in striving to ensure it remains sustainable. It has maintained its external focus even at a time when the financial pressures and related organisational changes could easily lead to it concentrating more internally.

The council is to be congratulated in its endeavour to be more transparent in its decision making. Webcasting of Full Council and Planning Committee meetings is now in place providing the public and partners with the experience of seeing and understanding how key decisions affecting them are informed and made. However, with this transparency it becomes vital that the council is seen as a place that business is conducted with efficiency and effectiveness and that the community is getting value for money from time spent on key council decisions rather than time being spent on political point scoring or seeking to challenge the advice of officers. The number of questions on notice from elected members and motions are examples of inefficient use of time. Whilst it is important to afford members the right to ask questions and present motions for debate the quantity is questionable. Members could ask many of their questions outside the formal council meeting. Full Council is the 'shop window' and it is the responsibility of all elected members to ask questions in a way that enhances democratic decision making and accountability. It may be appropriate to regulate the questions and motions, perhaps by requiring motions to be signed by five elected members before being submitted, by limiting questions to one per member or by being more stringent on the types of questions and motions that are allowed, for example, by restricting them to council business only.

The council is open to change and learning and demonstrates an ability to make tough decisions and set aside political differences to address financial and other challenges. At Full Council in February 2018 a final budget for 2018/19 was approved including a council tax increase for the services provided by the Council of 2.9% based on a Band D property. The budget received the support of all political groups on the council and was carried through in record time. The council invited the LGA to conduct a Planning Peer Challenge and have implemented its recommendations.

There is evidence of political differences being set aside within the 'rainbow cabinet' and there is widespread recognition for the openness and inclusiveness of the Leader and Cabinet. A Member Liaison Group consisting of all Group Leaders exists to oversee Publica enabling views to be expressed about service delivery. This will help with keeping elected members, officers and the public informed about decisions and results.

The combined senior management team consisting of the council's Head of Paid Service and Publica's Executive Directors are viewed as being 'one team' by elected members and staff. This is experienced at the next tier down amongst Publica's Group Managers who identify themselves as being part of the Forest. There are longstanding and positive working relationships amongst officers who demonstrate a genuine commitment to making things work.

There were some concerns expressed to the peer team about the visibility of some Publica officers in the Coleford Council offices. The council has introduced video conferencing for some meetings and this appears to be helping to 'bridge' the geographical distances but is not everyone's preferred way of working. The peer team was not able to draw any specific conclusions about this during the time available whilst on-site but would like to relay the many stories it heard from officers about the amount of time spent travelling across the geography of four local authorities in order to conduct their work. If too much time is spent in travelling time this could affect the amount of time that is available for strategic management and oversight as well as in delivery of services before the digital service technology platform is enabled.

The Cabinet and Corporate Leadership Team (CLT) meet on a regular basis and CLT meets fortnightly, however, the peer team struggled to see how agendas are aligned to corporate priorities. It was observed that some of the detailed operational aspects of the council's work were being reflected in Cabinet discussions. This is understandable given the newness of the Cabinet and therefore indicates that some clarity is needed of member and officer roles and responsibilities to help with the efficiency and effectiveness of the Cabinet/CLT meetings. Role clarity is important to avoid a blurring of roles between councillors and officers and allow for a clear focus by members on setting strategic direction. This leaves managers and officers space and more time to be responsible for operational delivery. The enthusiasm of councillors to drive change is understandable but care needs to be taken to respect the characteristics and boundaries of each other's roles. Clarity of role would also help to promote positive working between members and officers.

In terms of meeting structure, there may be the opportunity for a tighter agenda for the majority of meetings with perhaps a limited number of meetings being more open in nature. Cabinet and CLT should have a shared endeavour in the ongoing assurance that the Corporate Plan can be delivered within the resources and capacity available now and for the future.

The council needs to strengthen its evidence base and assessment of risk to improve decision making and minimise risk. The council recognises the importance of the success of its partnership service delivery company, Publica, and is clear about the unique opportunity that needed to be created for the council to be sustainable whilst achieving intended outcomes. Whilst confidence in the company is evident - stemming as it has from the organic nature of shared services and staff joint working arrangements - it is vital that as the most significant transformational project to have faced the council goes into its next phase the council is able to assess and manage risk in terms of its own capacity and financial envelope. This approach should also be extended as key contracts come up for renewal or refresh.

The peer team observed that it is custom and practice to expect that the agenda at Full Council will not be completed within the time allocated and so an additional fall back meeting is usually scheduled for the following week. We also heard of motions being made repeatedly even when a response had been provided either at Full Council or soon after. In light of this, reflection is needed so that all elected members respect the right kind of behaviours of political leadership in order to conduct its business in an efficient and effective way – this includes the importance of respect for officers as people, in their roles and in the advice they offer.

4.4 Financial planning and viability

The council has good and political understanding of the scale of the budget challenge. It shows good self-awareness in recognising that despite a strong focus on financial planning and viability, sustainable budgets remain the biggest risk to secure public services. The council has taken a prolonged and pragmatic approach and since 2010/11 it has overseen substantial changes through developing shared services and partnerships with other local authorities as part of its Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). Senior management costs have been reduced and income has been generated from discretionary services. These efforts have been part of a managed process over time to minimise the impact of cuts to core funding and to maintain front-line services.

Robust planning processes for financial expenditure are in place, there is a history of making savings targets and appropriate use of reserves. The council is therefore well positioned to tackle the financial risks facing it in the medium term. The council has identified a savings target of £713k for 2018/19 plus an income improvement target of £415k from business rates and additional recycling income. £679k (95%) of the savings target and £250k (60%) of the income target has already been achieved. The MTFS identifies a further savings and income growth requirement of £1,488k for the two years 2018/19 to 2019/20. Important to note is not to rely on deficit reduction reserve on an ongoing basis as this would be financially unsustainable.

Publica is the council's most significant contractor and the council has clear plans about how it will monitor its progress. Current plans include looking at its Annual Report and Business Plan at Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet and the production of "Keeping You Connected" updates by email from Publica to all elected members. These and other informal meetings provide a framework to identify any key risks and challenges outside of the company or council control; budget monitoring and service delivery matters. Publica's business case anticipates a saving, which will contribute greatly to closing the predicted funding gap and the partnership is on track to achieve this. Therefore, the council needs to maintain oversight of the anticipated savings of £5.7m a year in total for the four councils through Publica and council's own savings of £1.338m per annum by 2019.

Good mechanisms are in place to assist budget monitoring arrangements. Financial risk management is a regular feature of the CLT agenda, where the strategic risk register is reviewed quarterly, or more regularly if required. Actions needed to rectify savings would be identified through this process and reported to Cabinet. The Performance and Finance Scrutiny Panel takes a lead in monitoring the council's performance, receiving quarterly budget and performance reports which provide data against a number of performance

indicators as well as progress on key projects - these reports are presented to Cabinet on a monthly basis.

The recently established Budget and Financial Strategy cross party Cabinet Support Group chaired by the Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member for Finance, Governance, Performance and Shared Working provides additional capacity for financial planning and monitoring. The Support Group is supported by the Section 151 officer and is in place to assist in the formulation of a balanced budget for the next financial year, reviewing existing budget and overseeing the existing grant funding provided under annual service level agreements. The Member Liaison Group overseeing Publica includes Scrutiny Chairs and enables a link back to all elected members.

The council has a strong Audit Committee enabled by the well established and collaborative relationships within the council that ensures the Audit Committee gets the support and information that it needs to oversee financial processes, audit and risk management. This is observed by external audit and in the way the committee conducts its business, sets its agenda and attends regular training and briefing sessions. The financial risk register is a standing item on the Audit Committee agenda, as is the Draft Annual Governance Statement on which it comments.

The council has a well-established process for the development of the Capital Strategy and associated Asset Management Plan, adopting a four year planning cycle albeit that years three and four are viewed as 'indicative' only. The solutions predicated within the Medium Term Financial Strategy are heavily dependent on the recommendations within the Capital Strategy and through close management the council has maintained a capital programme which is sustainable and affordable. In going forward it will be important to be realistic about the need for capital being in excess of the resources available.

The council is making good use of capital resources to help it become more self-financing. This includes work toward the acquisition of a depot and a property investment portfolio. In addition, in October 2017, Council approved a budgetary allocation towards the development of Lawnstone Square in Coleford which will provide much needed housing, work-space and public realm.

The Cabinet and CLT recognise that the council is on a journey in relation to achieving a strong commercial focus. Foremost is for the council to develop a Commercial Strategy to lead and direct its focus and priorities that are right for the Forest so that there is a clear and targeted approach to maximising commercial opportunity based on a series of critical factors. Through Publica, the council needs to identify opportunity, ambition and risk appetite in assessing options that would include business development, and use of flexible and commercially viable Service Level Agreements (SLAs). As part of the Commercial Strategy it will also be necessary to revisit fees and charges to maximise income.

4.5 Capacity to deliver

The council has a reputation for taking a pragmatic and honest approach to partnership working and this is valued by many of its partners. The council has many shared service arrangements in place that are working successfully. These include Revenues & Benefits,

a partnership with Gloucester City Council and Civica, and as part of the South West Audit partnership for Internal Audit. The council is also a partner in Ubico that provides grounds maintenance, cleaning and caretaking for the Forest of Dean District as well as waste services for other local authority partners in the sub region. In going forward and in refreshing the Corporate Plan, the council can build upon its partnership experience to ensure that the purpose and intention of partnerships and contracts are fit for purpose to meet the stated outcomes.

Despite significant reductions in staff over a period of time, staff are open to change. The vast majority of staff we spoke to were passionate about working for the council and were determined to deliver of their best for public services in the district. They valued the senior management's highly amenable and personable style and cite this approach as key to determining the culture for ways of working. The vision for cultural change in the council has been developed over a number of years and is based on extensive staff engagement and an 'open door' and 'accessible managers policy'. There are many examples of good work at operational level because of loyal, dedicated and committed staff e.g. Community Engagement Team - and many more that impressed the peer team.

A recent staff survey generally was positive in relation to themes such as pride in working for the council, the Staff Recognition Scheme, some good development and career opportunities and the ways in which IT support has enabled more efficient working. Particularly strong were results in team working. Since the transfer of staff to Publica there are clearly some areas of challenge that need to be focused on to ensure staff are fully supported through future changes. In particular, it will be vital to ensure effective two-way communication channels to deliver a successful Transformation Programme.

In refreshing the Corporate Plan it will be important that the council considers the capacity required to deliver its priorities and day to day business. At the same time the capacity to deliver and oversee ambitious plans for the future needs to be realistically assessed, understood, managed and communicated. This will need to include; oversight of key stages in implementing the Transformation Programme's operating model; resourcing key priorities e.g. tourism and digital/connectivity, environment, commercialism, social inclusion, health and wellbeing and consideration of the retained officer capacity including the client management of the Publica contract and management of members.

The council has recognised that, as a small authority, sharing capacity has been important to its future resilience and sustainability. In going forward with the partnership service delivery company it is important to remember and apply those important checks reviewing the effectiveness of its leadership, capability and capacity to sustain and develop its complex strategic partnerships to assure resilience and business continuity.

Follow up visit

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge process includes a follow up visit. The purpose of the visit is to help the Forest of Dean District Council assess the impact of the peer challenge and demonstrate the progress it has made against the areas of improvement and development identified by the peer team. It is a lighter-touch version

of the original visit and does not necessarily involve all members of the original peer team. The timing of the visit is determined by the council. Our expectation is that it will occur within the next 2 years.

Next Corporate Peer Challenge

The current LGA sector-led improvement support offer includes an expectation that all councils will have a Corporate Peer Challenge or Finance Peer Review every 4 to 5 years. It is therefore anticipated that the council will commission the next Peer Challenge before 2022.

Appendix A

Additional areas for the peer team to consider/review/provide feedback on

The peer team have addressed the additional areas you asked us to look at within the main areas of feedback above and most importantly, in the recommendations as you requested. As a summary we have listed the key points under each of the additional areas below:

Are the council's current joint working arrangements effective? Is the council clear about its commercial potential and aspirations? Does the council use its own assets to best advantage?

- Partnerships created over time based on a pragmatic approach reflecting the needs of each service
- Agreed criteria set for commercial property investments
- Ideas identified for future commercial consideration e.g. council offices and the Northern Quarter
- Forest Economic Partnership encouraging early signs of engagement by a wide range of partners
- Recognition that it's early days for Publica with plans still emerging e.g. commercial strategy
- Ongoing focus important regarding elected member oversight of strategic partnerships and Publica e.g. scrutiny, Member Liaison Group, with training for the roles
- Need to ensure the development and implementation of the commercial strategy is resourced

Leadership within the council and giving clear direction; New Head of Paid Service and new Cabinet. How coherent as a Cabinet and are they giving clear direction?

- Early days for the Cabinet and Head of Paid Service who are working together to deliver priorities
- Invigorating, open and transparent 'Rainbow Cabinet'
- Ownership of portfolios from an early stage
- Quick wins evident: Lydney Harbour improvements, setting up of the Forest Economic Partnership
- Recognise the need for a refreshed corporate plan and an oversight of partnership working
- Understand the resources available to deliver on priorities
- Need to ensure priorities are based on clear need
- Balance short and long term aspirations – and focus
- Clarity of roles and responsibilities
- Cross party working groups are helping with transparency of the agenda
- Keep working on getting buy-in and understanding for the vision and direction, including the role of the council in achieving the outcomes required
- Take up opportunities for learning and support